

Get through divorce and heal

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, explores challenges that affect us all. This issue, she examines how therapy can be an invaluable support during and after divorce

Divorce may be a welcome release from a troubled relationship, but there's no doubt it can be traumatic and stressful for the couple, their family and friends. According to the Holmes and Rahe stress scale, divorce is second only to the death of a spouse.

One of the reasons for this is that divorce isn't necessarily quick, in fact, it is often a long and drawn-out process. Under current legislation, which is under review, one spouse has to take the blame, whether it's for adultery, unreasonable behaviour or, more rarely, desertion. Alternatively, a couple needs to have been separated for two years and both be in agreement for a divorce to happen. However, if one spouse doesn't want to split, then they have to be separated for five years to divorce.

A tangled, expensive web

Divorce rates in the UK have fallen in recent years but, in this month's podcast, psychotherapist and UKCP chair Martin Pollecoff highlights that this is less about increased marital harmony and more to do with rocketing housing costs and other living expenses that prohibit a clean split.

On average, divorce costs a couple £14,561 – but that's if it's a straightforward, agreed division of assets. All too often, warns Pollecoff, his clients face alarmingly high divorce bills of anything from £35k to £250k. This is what is known as high-conflict divorce – a term denoting situations where a marriage ends and a war begins,

characterised by hostile, protracted court actions, custody battles and even allegations of violence and other abuse.

In this situation, you may feel you need an army, rather than a psychotherapist, yet a therapist can be an essential, helpful resource to aid your coping and recovery. A psychotherapist offers a safe, non-judgmental space to help you manage complex emotions, confusion and anger as well as address fears about an uncertain future and the effect of divorce on children, if you are a parent.

Pollecoff describes how you may be tempted to retaliate at the beginning of a divorce, but this can have repercussions in a high-conflict case especially, and can be used against you. It is better to explore your feelings through therapy before acting to determine the most prudent way forward.

He also advises keeping as many friends around you as possible: 'Even ones you haven't spoken to for years – get back in touch because you'll need them,' he says.

This all sounds a far cry from Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin's 'conscious uncoupling'. Paltrow faced a backlash in 2014, when she announced what seemed like an impossibly cordial split from the singer. She has since revealed that the period leading up to that announcement was far from plain sailing, but they focused on where they agreed, rather than their differences: that the children must come first.

In a recent interview with podcast host Dax Shepard,



PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CARL STANLEY

Paltrow said: 'The most common wound I heard from children of divorce was, "My parents couldn't be in the same room. They couldn't be friends."'

Towards the light

Pollecoff says conscious uncoupling isn't a newfangled celebrity whim but a well-established and eminently sensible strategy, although one that takes work and means compromise to enable a smoother transaction. Therapy helps each partner to arrive at that point of mutual agreement, which may take time.

Psychotherapy is a process in which you are trying to get someone out the other side of a difficult set of circumstances feeling renewed. A therapist points out the changes you are going through during divorce, so you can better understand who you are at the end of it.

As Pollecoff encourages, there is always light at the end of the tunnel and he has seen clients' lives transform for the better in dramatic ways: 'There is no change in consciousness without pain,' he says, 'and if you've got someone to guide you through, then that's fantastic.'

ASK THE EXPERT...

UKCP chair and therapist Martin Pollecoff has built a specialist practice helping clients involved in high-conflict divorces



Q What are the first steps for a couple considering a divorce?

Wait. Step back from the ledge and see a couples therapist before taking the plunge. Around 25 per cent of couples who put a divorce in motion abandon it. Ten per cent of divorcees say they want to get back together with their ex and 15 per cent reconcile. There are no cheap or bloodless divorces. If you think that running one household is expensive, how do you expect to manage two? I do appreciate, however, that some marriages are so toxic that divorce is the only way forward.

Q What should I do if I want a divorce, but my spouse seems happy?

You need to talk. I have been there – the content, oblivious partner. Six years later, after a year of solid and often painful therapy, we are happier than

we have ever been. The caveat is that both of you must want to make the marriage work.

Q We get on and love each other but we have lost sexual chemistry. Is our marriage over?

No. See a sex therapist and, if that does not work, consider an alternative. In some cases, there are three or more people in a marriage. When partners seek relationships outside their marriage, it is because those relationships supply something that is missing. It may be that partners came from families in which love was erratic – sometimes given and often withdrawn. They may feel that they cannot trust putting all their love into one person and their external relationships are a handrail. It may be that they are still dedicated to their partner and the marriage can be saved. martinpollecoff.com



THE UKCP TALKING THERAPIES PODCAST

How to navigate divorce

Listen to Sarah Niblock and Martin Pollecoff discuss divorce at psychologies.co.uk/how-therapy-can-be-invaluable-support-during-divorce-podcast-ukcp

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

• **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.

• **To find the right therapist,** log on to psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist to locate a therapist near you.

